

BUFFALO BILL AND THE DANISH OGRES: AN EXAMINATION OF THE CONCEPTS OF OGRES AND CAVEMEN

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INTRODUCTION

Ogres, as understood from old European folklore, have traditionally been thought of as man-eating giants of generally human form, though uglier and stronger, that often lived in caves. In the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the popular concept of “Cavemen” developed, based on the discovery of ancient human and “Neanderthal Man” bones and artifacts from the caves of Europe. During the twentieth century the two concepts of Ogres and Cavemen appear to have intertwined in twentieth century popular literature. One of the earliest books showing the combination of the two concepts is a Buffalo Bill dime novel written and published in Denmark, which story is examined in this paper.

BUFFALO BILL

William F. Cody, popularly known as “Buffalo Bill”, was a world famous plainsman, hunter, Army Scout, and showman of the American West. Born in Iowa in 1846, he earned his nickname for his skill in hunting buffalo for the railroads, which they used to feed their work crews as they moved out onto the western plains. After his buffalo hunting days he became a scout for various U.S. army units, including the 5th Cavalry. This was his main occupation during the Sioux Indian Wars of 1868, when he met Ned Buntline (Edward Judson). Buntline made Cody famous by writing the first Buffalo Bill Dime Novel in 1869 and then having Cody come east and star in a theater production as himself. Eventually Cody became so successful that he started a full scale Wild West show in 1883. With his Wild West, Buffalo Bill toured America and Europe several times, and actively participated in show business until his death in 1917 (Russell 1960).

Buffalo Bill dime novels were very popular during the time of Cody’s theatrical combinations and his Wild West exhibitions in both America and Europe. The stories were mostly “blood and thunder” adventures of life on the western frontier fighting bad men and Indians (Johannsen 1950:3-6). Many of these stories were translated into a variety of European languages, with some attempts by Europeans to write their own Buffalo Bill dime novels. After the Wild West show had been retired and Cody himself was dead, his popularity continued. In Denmark there appeared a series of Buffalo Bill dime novels in the mid-twentieth century, after the dime novel industry had largely ended in the United States (Goodstone 1970: xi). The Danish firm of De Forenede Forlag (United Publishers, of Copenhagen) began publishing their Den Nye Wild-West Serie on Buffalo Bill, with one new novel each two weeks. The booklets are only about thirty some pages each. These novels differ from the American authored stories, in that identifiably European concepts of villains and enemies were presented, which included ogres and the strong suggestion of a minotaur (Figs. 1, 2). The Danish authors took elements of ancient European epic literature and fused them with new stories based on an American culture hero on the American western frontier.

BUFFALO BILL AND THE DANISH OGRES

The publication I will discuss here in order to examine the presence of ogres in this series is issue number 7, “Vildmaendene I Klippebjergene” or “Wildmen in the Rocky Mountains,” by Phil Farwest. The storyline in this novel goes like this: Two fur trappers named Store Lyn (Big Lightning) and Plets kud (Bullseye) are exploring a remote section of the Rocky Mountains. They find a white man who has been beaten and torn, who with his dying words tells them:

“A hairy giant...Murderers...Cannibals....Monsters....of a dark cave.”

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The trappers think him delirious with fever, but then realize that something attacked him, and so ask "Who is this bloodthirsty ogre? It can't be part-Indian, for they don't come up here." The trappers then find a giant set of bear tracks that they follow to a small cave, in which is a dead but gigantic grey-white bear, twice the size of a grizzly, with four inch long canines, and a stone-tipped spear sticking out of it. Quite impressed and a bit bewildered, the trappers decide to leave and return later when better prepared. Therefore the trappers go to St. Louis and meet with their friend Buffalo Bill, who upon hearing their tale decides to return with them. However, two scoundrel gamblers and gunslingers overhear the men but think they are planning to find a goldmine. When the three heroes leave for the mountains the bandits hire a guide, Indian Joe, and follow undetected.

When the trappers return to the cave where they found the giant bear they discover that the head and feet have been chopped off, but the skin remaining. Because the hide was so valuable they assume that no humans could have done this, even though some sort of cutting tool had obviously been used. Suddenly they hear their horses neigh. They discover the horses gone, and a lot of blood. The expert trackers note that there are no drag marks on the ground, and the four sets of footprints leading away include one pair that is very deep, so they conclude that something has carried a dead horse with it. This was a great mystery, but they decide to follow the tracks and by doing so find another cave, which they enter. By now, however, the bandits following them have also discovered the cave, and they see the trappers enter but choose to wait and let them dig the gold. Their plan is to shoot the trappers when they bring the gold out of the cave.

Inside the cave a campfire is seen with giant apelike creatures sitting around it. Suddenly the heroes find themselves ambushed by other ape-men above throwing huge rocks down at them. Buffalo Bill runs to the cave entrance, but gets pinned down by the bandits' gunfire. However, the two trappers are caught by the ape-men and taken to the fire. The creatures are described as humanlike, but at least 50% taller than Bullseye, who stood 6'6" himself.

But the monsters were not apes. They had fur all over their bodies, but their fur was not so thick – the black skin underneath shined through. The legs were fairly short and bended and their long arms were very muscular and reached down to their knees. Their chests were incredibly big and strong. They had wide but low foreheads and flat backs of their necks. Their noses were flat and their big cheek muscles made their mouth look swollen as they showed their teeth.

The narrator tells us that they were not human, but the label "ape-men" served them well. Included in the group were women and children. On the floor were bones, stone knives and boomerangs, and spears. The narrator further tells the reader that this was a race of beings extinct elsewhere that had survived in the caves of this remote land.

On one side of the cave was a crude clay statue of a bear, but the head was that of the dead bear the trappers had found earlier. The ape-men ate the meat of the horse, then grabbed their spears and repeatedly stuck the clay cave bear statue, and danced around it. By so doing they believed they gained power over the giant cave bears, which also still existed in this part of the world.

While the men were occupied with the clay bear the women came over to the captives and began purring and pulling their hair and examining them. This made the trappers feel very uncomfortable, as they suspected they might get eaten. However, all the males had eaten so much horsemeat that they became drunk, and laid down to rest. The women and children then moved in and ate the rest of the horsemeat, allowing the trappers to jump up and run out of the cave. The ape-men then woke and ran after them, but in the gunfight between the bandits and trappers all the ape-men who followed got shot too. Buffalo Bill and the trappers, victorious, decide to keep this story secret because they think no one will believe them, so they leave.

In this story I consider the “ape-men” to be a merging of the traditional giant man-eating ogres, such as found in the Danish epic *Beowulf* (Leonard 1939; Raffel 1963), and the more recent concept of the “Caveman.” In this story the Caveman elements are very strong. Nearly the entire description of the scene inside the cave was taken from reports of Pleistocene age cave excavations. These excavations show large amounts of animal bones and stone tools and a certain amount of cannibalism argued on the basis of skulls found with enlarged holes and cut marks at the bases of the craniums. But note the emphasis upon the cave bear ceremony. In 1923, near Montespan in the French Pyrenees, a cave was found by Norbert Casteret containing a massive “body” rudely sculptured from clay and a bear skull mounted on a stick for its head, which site dates to the Upper Pleistocene (Kurten 1976: 95-96). This clay bear form bore marks of spearpoint indentations. Thus the ceremony described in the story was inferred directly from scientific reports of the existence of a cave bear cult among prehistoric humans.

There is a large amount of overlap in how we as modern westerners perceive “Ogres” and “Cavemen”. In the above story the creatures are about 9 or 10 feet tall and can carry dead horses without dragging them. Those are attributes that no fossil man can fulfill, not even *Gigantopithecus*, the famed “dental hominid.” But the remaining features, of being furry, bow-legged with long arms and low sloping foreheads, fit perfectly the description of many fossil hominids accepted as fact for most of the twentieth century. The first physical evidence of any non-*Homo sapiens* fossil hominid was of the famed “Neanderthal Man.” This species’ first known fossil was a large skullcap with huge brow ridges but no face that was found in a cave in the Neanderthal gorge in 1857, and described by D. Schaaffhausen (1969:141; orig. 1858) as belonging to “...a period antecedent to the time of the Celts and Germans, and were in all probability derived from one of the wild races on northwestern Europe, spoken of by Latin writers;...”. At that time the antiquity of man was not yet proven to extend beyond the 6000 years calculated from biblical scriptures, and Charles Darwin had not yet published his *Origin of Species*, so explanations of the find relied on biblical sources, history, and folklore. J. W. Dawson argued that the skull “¼belonged to one of those wild men, half-crazed, half-idiotic, cruel and strong, who are always more or less to be found living on the outskirts of barbarous tribes, and who now and then appear in civilized communities, to be consigned perhaps to the penitentiary or the gallows when their murderous propensities manifest themselves. (Eisley 1961:274).” By 1860 geologists had proven human remains were to be found geologically associated with the bones of extinct animals, and so forced a longer human time span (Grayson 1983:168-198). Because the Neanderthal fossils looked so different they were given a separate species designation, *Homo neanderthalensis*.

Over the next 40 years more Neanderthal remains were discovered, but speculation as to what they represented did not progress much. In 1913 the leading French paleontologist Marecellin Boule summarized the available evidence and made conclusions that were accepted as valid for the next four decades. Boule’s reconstruction of Neanderthal bones at La Chapell-Aux-Saintes, found in 1908, was less than charitable (Straus and Cave 1957: 348). He concluded that this species was of an apelike or monkeylike appearance, more closely related to apes than humans and with a very primitive intellect. Their posture was slumped and their heads slung forward, and they walked on the sides of their feet because of a supposed opposable big toe, as found on gorillas and chimpanzees. Technical illustrators of the time tended to emphasize the primitiveness both of the actual fossils and of the flesh and skin “reconstructions” of what the Neanderthals would have looked like (Van Reybrouck 1998: 56-64). Charges have even been made that some of the fossil evidence of the early Neanderthal finds have been not only misinterpreted but actually altered by persons attempting to make the evidence look as non-human and as ape-like as possible (Cuozzo 1998).

Bjorn Kurten states that this caricature of Neanderthal “¼quickly passed into folklore as something we all recognize only too well: the “Cave Man” type of Alley Oop. (Kurten 1980: xiv).” Not until 1957 at a symposium honoring the 100th anniversary of the discovery of the Neanderthal skull was Boules description effectively argued against, based on greater

amounts of fossil evidence (c.f. Straus and Cave 1957; Eiseley 1957). The generally accepted scientific view today is that Neanderthals were fully as hominid as we, though still considered as a separate species. The problem of why they disappeared 35,000-30,000 years ago is still unresolved (Tattersall 1999: 198-203).

The ogre theory of Neanderthal Man became so powerful that the distinction between *H. sapiens* and *H. neanderthalensis* virtually disappeared within the general public's concept of "Caveman". In what I see as the popular view the essential elements of Caveman culture have become that caves are required for habitation, that the caves have rock art painted on their walls, and Venus figurines carved of stone and mammoth ivory are held as sacred objects. The Cavemen live by hunting and gathering, and have the Cave Bear Cult as a central religious tenet. This latter emphasis on the cave bear comes from early finds reported from Pleistocene era caves of giant cave bear skulls stored in stone vaults, on small alters, and one with a thigh bone thrust through the empty eye orbital. And, as referred to before, there have been several reports of Neanderthal cannibalism reported from Pleistocene sites. This gave a very sinister, indeed, bloodthirsty reputation to the Caveman concept. The validity of both the "Cave Bear Cult" and the charges of cannibalism with regard to Neanderthals have been critically challenged (c.f. Tattersall 1999), but these perceptions still hold strongly in the public mind, as evidenced by twentieth century popular literature.

The intertwining of the concepts of the ogre and the Caveman is clearly shown in the Danish dime novel, where Buffalo Bill is fighting nine foot high bloodthirsty ogres who practice a cave bear religion. The idea of ogres living in caves is not new, as even the Danish Beowulf ogres lived in a great hall or cave beneath the waters. One Italian story, *The Ogre*, republished in 1900 by Lang and illustrated by H.J. Ford (Fig.3), has an ogre who lives in a cave described as having "¼a huge head and wrinkled brow – eyebrows that met, squinting eyes, a flat broad nose, and a great gash of a mouth from which two huge tusks stuck out. His skin was hairy, his arms enormous, his legs like sword blades, and his feet as flat as ducks (Lang 1900:233)." Such descriptions lead one to conclude that the Caveman concept in general and even the old Neanderthal concept in particular are not all that different from that of the Ogre, with the notable exception of the quality of gigantism.

Other 20th century writers have also shown the natural relationship of the ogre and Neanderthal/Caveman concepts. H.G. Wells in his book *Outline of History* attributed to Sir Harry H. Johnston the idea that, with specific reference to Neanderthals, "The dim racial remembrance of such gorilla-like monsters, with cunning brains, shambling gait, hairy bodies, strong teeth, and possibly cannibalistic tendencies, may be the germ of the ogre in folklore..." (Wells 1922: 90) (Fig. 4). William Golding (1955) in his novel *The Inheritors* tells the story of a family of Neanderthals that are physically based on the ogre/ape-man model, but presented with compassion and respect. In the story, however, the family of *H. sapiens* that encounter the Neanderthals literally regard them as "devils."

Michael Crichton's novel *Eaters of the Dead*, published in 1976 is a retelling of the classic tale of *Beowulf*. In this story Crichton changes the ogres of Grendel and his mother by substituting in their places a tribe of Neanderthals who dress for battle as bears, and have a Mother cult leader whom they worship with Venus figurines. Yet Crichton gives them a decidedly monstrous appearance, even beyond the image created by Boules. Crichton's Neanderthals, which he calls Wendols, are grunting creatures of the night that eat human brains for food. They are short, squat, hairy, have large faces with brow ridges, thick matted fur and very sharp teeth. At the back of his book Crichton includes an appendix in which fictitious experts discuss the concept of Neanderthals being the fossil evidence for the Wendols.

Dance of the Tiger by the Finnish paleontologist Bjorn Kurten was published in 1980. In this novel of the Ice Age, Neanderthals are presented without the Boules ape-man caricature. But the *H. sapiens* in his book collectively refer to the Neanderthals as "trolls." So Kurten, following the idea of Johnston and the example of Golding and his "devils," uses a work of fiction to argue that the very concept of troll, and by extension ogre, may in fact be a

cultural memory in European folklore of Neanderthals who coexisted with modern man up until 30,000 years ago.

The recent work by John Darnton (1996), *Neanderthal*, shows evil, murderous, brain-eating Neanderthals living in dark caves with rock art, while the good pacifist Neanderthals are vegetarians who live in grass huts. This is of interest, as the evil ogre-like characters are the Cavemen while the good guys are living in a sort of utopian fantasy of late twentieth century western culture.

Paul Graves-Brown comments on several of these novels in order to argue that the Neanderthal concept has become symbolic of nature itself. He sees the origins of the Neanderthal as apish-brute concept as falling within the traditional paradigm of Man vs. Nature, evidence of our continuing quest to set ourselves apart, to be distinct from nature (Graves-Brown 1996:980).

CONCLUSION

Looking back at the Danish dime novel, it is apparent that Buffalo Bill was fighting a very sophisticated enemy, one of the very first Ogre-Cavemen. In the twentieth century, as shown in popular literature it is apparent that the two concepts actually seem to be influencing one another. In the scientific literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the concept of ogre was practically a model used to interpret the early Neanderthal fossil bones, and it has taken decades to recognize, much less overcome, this initial prejudice. In modern popular literature it is not uncommon for writers in need of an evil ogre figure to use a more modern evil Caveman figure in its place. **

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** For translation of the Danish novel *Vildmaendene I Klippebjergene* I thank Johan Cronholm and Anders Runneson, and Anders Runneson for translation of *Praeriens Skraek*, though any errors are my own.

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FIGURES

1. Cover, *Vildmaendene I Klippebjergene*. Buffalo Bill Den Nye Wild-West Serie #7. Denmark, Copenhagen: De Forenede Forlag, n.d.
2. Cover, *Praeriens Skraek*. Buffalo Bill Den Nye Wild-West Serie #15. Denmark, Copenhagen: De Forenede Forlag, n.d.
3. "Antonio is not afraid of the Ogre," by H.J. Ford (Lang 1900:345).
4. "Neanderthal Man" by J.F. Horrabin, (Wells 1922:76).

RESUMO

O conceito de Ogre é apresentado na sua relação com a descoberta e reportagem sobre o Neandartal no séc. XIX. Propõe-se que o conceito vulgar do "Homem das Cavernas" é uma generalização recente do Neandartal, *Homo sapiens sapiens* primitivo e outros fósseis humanóides. Os dois conceitos de Ogre e de Homem das Cavernas estão intimamente relacionados na literatura popular do séc. XX, parecendo ter-se entrecruzado e até fundido. Um dos primeiros livros que mostrou a combinação dos dois conceitos foi o romance em folheto de cordel sobre Buffalo Bill, publicado na Dinamarca, história essa que é examinada neste artigo.

ABSTRACT

The concept of Ogre is discussed with reference to the discovery and reporting of Neanderthal Man in the nineteenth century. The general public concept of a "Caveman" is argued to be a more recent generalization of Neanderthal, early *Homo sapiens sapiens*, and other fossil hominids. The two concepts of Ogre and Caveman are shown in 20th century popular literature to be strongly related, and to have actually intertwined or merged. One of the earliest books showing the combination of the two concepts is a Buffalo Bill dime novel written and published in Denmark, which story is examined in this paper.

Four Figures